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Dominique Avon

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Suicide, Islam and Politics

Reflections on the Events in Tunisia

Dominique AVON

The revolts rocking the Maghreb were set off by a surge of suicides that greatly perplexed Islamic authorities. Were they a symptom of secularization, or even of a radical transgression of a Koranic prohibition?

In January 1969, a young man entered Wenceslas Square, doused himself with petrol and set himself on fire.¹ This was a desperate act to dramatize the failure to follow up the momentum of the “Prague Spring” of the previous year. For a whole generation of young Europeans, eastern as well as western, Jan Palach was a symbol, both tragic and heroic. In their eyes, what could be more anthropologically definitive than to give one’s life, to die voluntarily – and not slowly?² This was a rejection of the idea that suicide is scandalous. The young Czech student had imitated the action of a bonze, Tich Quang Duc, who had burned himself to death in Saigon in 1963 to protest against the Ngo Dinh Diem regime that was dependant on the United States, which was already engaged in fighting against North Vietnam and its allies in the south. At the end of 2010, the same gesture was made by a Tunisian fruit and vegetable merchant. In this case, Mohammad Al-Bu’azizi, in addition to the despair associated with being despised and underprivileged, a condition shared by many of his compatriots, also had the personal humiliation of having been struck by a woman, who represented the established order. But that was not the crucial factor, because within a month, around thirty people were to repeat this action of self-immolation, in Tunisia, Algeria,

¹ This article was translated into Arabic and published in *Al-Awan*, <http://www.alawan.org/%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%8C.html>

² For a somewhat contrasting view, see Vaclav Havel’s letter to Gustav Husak (1975), especially the passage about the “peace of the cemetery”, quoted in *Essais politiques*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, “Points”, 1990, pp. 31ff.

Morocco, Mauritania, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen. This is a headstrong action, and its effect is even greater for being the visible part of an increasingly widespread phenomenon, which breaks with the traditional idea that life is not primarily self-dependence.

Norms and Realities

Researchers know that the “real” is not the “norm”; among the duties of a specialist in the study of religion is that of measuring the distance between the “prescribed” and the “lived”.³ Suicide does exist in Muslim-majority societies, as elsewhere, both among women (with more attempts) and men (with more deaths), especially among the unemployed and the generation aged 18 to 30.⁴ In the middle of the 2000’s, in an article headlined “Every day, an Algerian commits suicide...”, *El Watan* reported: “Ending their lives in order to flee a reality too hard to endure: that is how 177 Algerian souls counted by the police were carried off during the past year, in addition to 128 sadly recorded by the national gendarmerie. Is there reason for alarm? The answer is undoubtedly yes, for the curve is going up and the number of suicides is increasing, even if only slightly.”⁵ The first official figures date from 1993, coming from the security services, who noticed a progression that, according to them, is putting Algeria up near the mean of Arab countries: from 0.94 per 100,000 in 1999 to 2.25 per 100,000 in 2003.⁶ These statistics understate the reality, the journalists add. With few or no self-immolations, the methods currently used are barbiturates, jumping, hanging, gas, guns and chemicals. Suicide attempts are made by consuming “spirit of salt”, a euphemism for products used to unblock drains. And, since sometimes it is only a short step from misery to humour,⁷ here is a short story: *A man walks into a local shop. The shopkeeper asks: “Can I help you, sir?” The man replies: “I would like a bottle of spirit of salt, please.” The shopkeeper asks: “To eat here or to take away?”*⁸

³ The author assumes full responsibility for what he has written, including the translations from Arabic. However, he wishes to thank Anaïs-Trissa Khatchadourian, Mouna Mohammed Cherif, Samah Mohammed, Samia al-Mechat, Nahed Caracalla, Amin Elias and Augustin Jomier for their exchanges with him about sources and views, without which this article would never have seen the light of day.

⁴ According to the *Jeune Indépendant*. Summary by Mourad: <http://www.algerie-dz.com/article18367.html>.

⁵ Nadja Bouaricha, “Chaque jour, un Algérien se suicide...”, *El Watan*, 27 March 2008. Reprinted in <http://www.afrik.com/article13962.html>.

⁶ “Suicide en Algérie: L’une des principales causes de mortalité”, *Le Soir d’Algérie*, 18 October 2005. Reprinted in <http://algerie.actudz.com/article0606.html>.

⁷ See the caricature by Hic published on the site of the daily *El Watan*: “Vent de révolte au Maghreb: Les Tunisiens passent le Flambeau” (“Winds of Revolt in the Maghreb: Tunisians Pass the Torch”): one man in flames touches the hand of another, who is overtaking him.

⁸ Reported by Mouna Mohammed Cherif, 18 January 2011.

Suicide has been a taboo subject for ages. The same is true of a number of practices related to customs concerning, for example, sexuality as it is actually experienced rather than as it is idealized in a projected denominational model (e.g. sexual relations before marriage, or homosexuality). Fearing the opprobrium that will descend on the suicide's family, there is a tendency for the cause of death to be hushed up. So in the current state of things, it is not possible for an analysis to be based on reliable statistics. The publicity given to the self-immolations of 2010-2011 has loosened some tongues, but has not removed doubts about the numbers. Thus, the Syrian website *Dpress* contends that countless numbers of self-immolators have followed in Al-Bu'azizi's footsteps.⁹ According to some sources, the suicide rate in Tunisia surpasses that of the other Arab countries. The views of psychotherapists (psychoanalysts, psychologists, and psychiatrists) have been sought, and civil associations have set up professional bodies to respond. For example, in Algeria, there is SOS Suicide Phénix and SOS Amitié. Also, imams in charge of Friday prayers constantly deliver messages forbidding suicide.¹⁰

The ills of the predominantly Muslim Arab world are often understood in geopolitical terms: contemplating its last two centuries, including colonization and the creation of nation states – Israel among them – conveys the image of recurring humiliation and of being outclassed on the international scene. Recent events have encouraged taking into account the salience of internal causes. Even if religious authorities are quick to see suicide as a sign of mental imbalance, they do not deny that men are willing to give their lives for the immanent – to buy bread and basic food inexpensively, to denounce social injustice (such as denial of housing, losing a job, or divorce and marginalization because of infertility), to combat dictatorship, and to have freedom of expression. It is possible to see in this an indication of secularization. In contrast to the South Asian context – or to the secularized European context – and with no explicit wish to rule out religious references, the gesture of self-immolation and of suicide more generally is clearly at odds with a proscription that is rooted in centuries-old traditions, which are based on the belief that fire is an instrument of divine punishment, and are reinforced by legal definitions.

⁹ *DPress*: <http://www.dp-news.com>, 17 January 2011. This is a Syrian news site.

¹⁰ The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia condemned self-immolation in his sermon on 21 January: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Qs6TQzEIJ0>

The Divided Counsel of “Men of Religion”

The recent wave of self-immolations has deeply troubled the “men of religion” [*rijāl al-dīn*] and generated disagreements among them. Two questions arise: (1) What is the view of Islamic law [*hukm al-Shari’a al-Islamiyya*] about these men [suicides]? and (2) Would it be right to consider them as martyrs [*shuhada*’]? The main line of division among Sunnis runs between the International Union of Muslim Scholars on one side, and the religious authorities connected with the Arab states (the affected principals) on the other. For some time, these scholars and other jurists who constitute magisterial authority were careful not to speak up about this matter, to avoid publicizing what is described as a “sin.”¹¹ During the last quarter century, the only type of suicide that is sometimes justified as “legal” [*mashru’a*] has been the “martyrdom” of the Muslim engaged in a “great mission” of armed *jihād* against the enemy in order to defend “his religion, his country, or his *umma*”. That is the position taken by Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qardhawi on the subject of Palestinians who commit suicide attacks against Israelis.¹² As President of the International Union of Muslim Scholars and the host of the program “Sharia and Life” on the Qatar television station *Al Jazeera*, he is heard by tens of millions of viewers.

Sheikh Qardhawi has supported the “revolution of the Tunisian people” and viewed the action of Mohammad Al-Bu’azizi as a *jihād* against injustice and corruption. After the flight of Ben Ali, he committed himself to continuing the struggle against all the “symbols” of dictatorship, to “bring down the rest of the familiar idols, Alat and Al-Uza,¹³ and the other servants associated with the regime that has made the Tunisians suffer all these years.”¹⁴ This language sparked vigorous reactions which drove him to explain that he had not issued a *fatwa* but had simply made a comment, explaining: “I call on God Almighty and implore him to pardon this young man, to absolve him, and to ignore the act that has put him at odds with the law [*shar*’] that forbids one from ending one’s life.” At the same time, he added that

¹¹ See Abdellatif Idrissi, “La notion de péché, de la période préislamique au début de l’islam, entre récit biblique et représentation locale”, in Dominique Avon and Karam Rizk (eds.), *De la faute et du salut dans l’histoire des monothéismes*, Paris, Karthala, “Signes des Temps”, 2010, pp. 21-37.

¹² See the justification given in “Le caractère légal des opérations martyres”, 31 May 2004, referring to his *fatwa*, which, according to Sheikh Al Qardhawi, was signed by 300 scholars during the twenty preceding years: http://www.qaradawi.net/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=2&item_no=3319&version=1&template_id=105&parent_id=16#. For a reference to Hamas: Olivier Danino, *Le Hamas et l’édification de l’Etat palestinien*, Paris, Karthala, “Les terrains du siècle”, 2009, pp. 100-109.

¹³ A reference to anti-Muslim Meccan deities, alluded to in the so-called “Satanic” Verses.

¹⁴ Talk by Sheikh Yusuf Al Qardhawi, 16 January 2011: <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/EB34C91D-6206-4EEF-B5F0-BA7B72939E55.htm>.

“unjust tyrants” are the ones who ought to be burned.¹⁵ While he justifies using “means of resisting injustice and tyranny”, that does not include recourse to things that are “forbidden” [*haram*] such as suicide and “setting one’s body on fire.”¹⁶

The position of the Mufti of Tunis is noticeably different. Othman Battikh’s reaction was unreserved condemnation of the self-immolation: “Suicide or attempted suicide is one of the greatest crimes. There is no legal difference between trying to kill oneself and [trying to kill] someone else.” In *Al Sabah*, he made it clear that the method is unimportant: whether it be by self-immolation, poison, drowning, hanging or anything else, suicide is an “abominable” act that constitutes a “crime” forbidden by the “law” [*shar’*], and it results in expulsion from the Muslim community and censure: “the miscreant should not be washed, prayed for, or buried in the Muslims’ cemetery.”¹⁷

The position of the Mufti of Tunis was reinforced by the declaration of the Al-Azhar Fatwa Committee, formulated by its president, Sheikh Abd al-Hamid al-Atrash: “Whatever the circumstances, it cannot be legal for a man to commit himself to suicide, no matter what means he has used – fire, drowning, or strangulation. Suicide is subject to God’s mercy, and only the community of disbelievers despair of God’s mercy.”¹⁸ Sheikh Al-Atrash made it clear that there was no case in which suicide was justifiable, and consequently that it was impossible to call anyone who has killed himself a “martyr”; it belongs to God alone to pardon this man if he recites the *shahada*. The Koranic citation is to verse 195 of Sura Al-Baqara (The Cow): “And spend in the way of Allah. And do not throw yourself into destruction by your own hands. And do good. For Allah loves those who do good.”¹⁹ Citing a *hadith* in which Mohammed is placed in a situation of opposition to his Companions on the question of sharing some plunder, Sheikh Al-Atrash emphasizes the fact that “the poor should not be the ones who are most fearful” about the ultimate reward. This reply goes to the heart of the argument about respecting all established authority. Without any consensus, it justifies

¹⁵ *Al Jazeera* news, reprinted in *al-Watan* (Koweit): <http://alwatan.kuwait.tt/articledetails.aspx?id=83558>.

¹⁶ Talk by Sheikh Yusuf Al Qardhawi, 19 January 2011, *Al Jazeera*: <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/4574D5A4-96DF-4616-829B-D048601B6FFC.htm?GoogleStatID=9>.

¹⁷ “The Mufti of Tunis Advises Not Praying for ‘Suicides by Fire’”, *al-Yawm al-Sâba*, 21 January 2011: <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=333733&SecID=88&IssueID=149>.

¹⁸ Declaration reprinted on the site <http://hibapress.com/details-1338.html>, 18 January 2011.

¹⁹ Koran 2, 195. The extract from this verse is repeated over and over again, for example in a *fatwa* by Saudi Sheikh Nasir ibn Sulayman Al-Umar: <http://www.almoslim.net/node/140211>.

the terms of a single alternative presented to the Muslim believer: give thanks if he who guides [*imam*] the community is just; be patient if he is not.

Suicide and Jihad

According to the testimony of survivors of suicide attempts by fire, or of those close to victims, if there is indeed an awareness of a religious transgression, suicide is sought not because of but in spite of that fact. In any case, whatever the motive for suicide is, the number signing up for it shows that the ban does not constitute a final, absolute barrier. And it is in this sense that it is possible to talk of it as a symptom of secularization. Majority Muslim societies are not – and have never been – closed off: their practices and values, norms and behaviour, are as elsewhere the product of a very complex motion of synthesis between “own” and “input” that continues to change over the centuries. Exposed to pressures less controlled today than previously, because of the greater circulation of people (tourism, business, migration) and the asymptotic growth in new means of communication, these societies no longer have the homogeneity that more strongly influenced them at independence.

The challenge to “unjust” authority is more active among Shiites than among Sunnis. True to its dual struggle – “anti-imperialist” against Israel and in favour of the “poor” in the world at large²⁰ – Hezbollah has applauded the revolutionary action against the corrupt Tunisian regime, but without commenting on self-immolation.²¹ And for good reason, for the veiled denunciation of an old Mazdean tradition of self-immolation that was introduced into the Arab Sunni majority by Shiites (even though “among the Maghrebian crypto-Shiites, sacrifice by blood, human or animal”, was preferred) is not guileless.²² Between 1998 and 2003, there were about 100 suicides by fire attempts in northwestern Iran.²³ Shiite authorities therefore say that the criticism should not be accepted, given the context of accumulating interdenominational tensions: persecutions in Pakistan; the war in Iraq in 2003 and continuing

²⁰ Dominique Avon and Anaïs-Trissa Khatchadourian, *Le Hezbollah. De la doctrine à l'action, une histoire du “parti de Dieu”*, Paris, Seuil, 2010.

²¹ Notice the silence maintained on the site <http://www.moqawama.org/>.

²² Chawki Amari et al., “Immolation: I burn, therefore I am”, *El Watan*, 21 January 2011. http://www.elwatan.com/dyn/imprimer.php?link=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.elwatan.com%2Fweekend%2F7jours%2Fimmolation-je-brule-donc-je-suis-21-01-2011-108133_178.php

²³ According to Michael Ayari, interviewed by Perrine Mouterde: “L’immolation, un geste de désespoir à forte charge politique”, *France 24*, 19 January 2011.

attacks there; blips in the divisions in Lebanon (2005, 2008 and 2011), bringing fears of a new civil war; rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with effects on the nuclear issue as well as on the Israeli-Palestinian and Lebanese conflicts; political claims of Shiites in the states of the Arabian Peninsula, and of Sunnis in Syria, and so on. The offices of the three main Shiite religious authorities (the schools of Khomeini, Sistani and Fadlallah) were interviewed. Only the first of them responded to the question of how to describe the act of suicide: “killing oneself for an important end or a major interest is not suicide, it is *jihad*.”²⁴

Because of what they reveal about the condition of the societies in the majority Muslim world, the events in Tunisia, followed by those in Egypt, constitute an upheaval comparable in scale to the Iranian revolution of 1979. Overwhelmed by popular initiatives aimed at challenging “injustice”, the religious authorities – Sunni as well as Shiite – have revealed internal disagreements. The unease is all the greater because of the fact that since the end of the eighteenth century the elites in these societies, with varying degrees of constraint in the various authoritarian regimes imposed from within or from outside, have vainly sought to agree on the configuration of the desirable polity.²⁵

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²⁴ Response sent on 28 January 2011 by a representative of the Ghurfa al-islâm al-’asîl fî ghurfa al-bâltûq (contact : ahkam@islamasil.com or ahkam@irib.ir).

²⁵ Dominique Avon and Amin Elias, “Laïcité: Navigation d’un concept autour de la Méditerranée”, published on 3 January 2011 in the online journal *Droit de cité*: <http://droitdecites.org/2011/01/03/religions-secularisation-et-laicite-des-concepts-en-mouvement-dcie/#more-9529>.